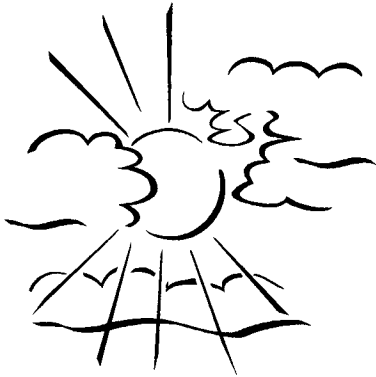


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Friday, July 29, 2005

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States tackle child issues

Published Wednesday, July 27, 2005 12:12:14 PM Central Time

From Associated Press
and Ironwood Daily Globe Staff reports

Wisconsin ranks 10th in child wellness and Michigan is 25th, according to the Kids Count 2005 Data Book, published annually by the Annie E. Casey Foundation.

The report generated state rankings by reviewing census data and figures from the National Center for Health Statistics for 2000, 2002 and 2003, the latest years information was available. New Hampshire ranked No. 1; Mississippi was last.

Wisconsin moved up from 12th place a year earlier, while Michigan dropped from 24th after posting substantial gains in child welfare rankings the previous two years.

Poverty and unstable family situations appear to be driving the problems children face, according to Kids Count data.

The percentage of poor children in Wisconsin increased from 12 percent in 2000 to 14 percent in 2003, the report said. That translates to 187,053 children in poverty in 2003, up from 154,867 in 2000, according to the Wisconsin Council on Children and Families.

The percent of children living in families where no parent has a full-time, year-round job also increased, from 27 percent in 2000 to 30 percent in 2003.

Michigan lost ground on two measures. The child poverty rate went up by 14 percent and the number of children in families without a full-time, year-round job increased by 10 percent in the three-year period reviewed for the report.

One in every six children in Michigan lived with a family earning less than the poverty level, or \$18,660 a year for a family of two adults and two children in 2003.

Michigan continues to lag behind the national economic recovery.

Although the data used for the report is a few years old, the state's slow economy has not changed significantly. Michigan's unemployment rate has hovered around 7 percent since the beginning of 2003 and has been among the highest in the country in recent months.

"We have an economy that has the expectation that there will be a certain amount of unemployment, but people still need to live. People need to be able to survive a downturn in the economy," said Jane Zehnder-Merrell, senior research associate for the Lansing-based advocacy group Michigan League for Human Services.

On the Michigan side

Locally, the problems reported by the survey are concentrated in a smaller number of children as the community gets smaller and the overall population gets older. Gogebic County had only 118 live births in 2002, down from 171 in 1990.

"The number of children in the birth to five year old category has decreased by nearly 50 percent in the past 15 years," said Betsy Wesselhoft of the two-county Human Services Coordinating Board. "Economic development is the key to stemming this tide."

"Poverty is definitely an indicator of stress in families," said Gordon Pekuri, director of Michigan's Department of Human Services office at Bessemer.

The Kids County data helps the agencies to respond in a timely way.

"In areas such as special education and child safety, where our numbers are of concern at first glance, there is more to these figures than meets the eye," said Wesselhoft. "Both areas are high to some extent because area professionals are paying close attention to the needs of the children and are being proactive by accessing services when 'red flags' first appear."

"At the same time, we are seeing more children with serious issues within the human service system. Among other efforts, more education for parents on meeting the needs of their children at the earliest stages of life is needed to maximize existing prevention efforts."

Pekuri said courts are among the agencies having an impact here.

"The number of delinquencies in our county tells me we have a very active juvenile court system in our county, and a very active juvenile court staff," he said.

Gogebic County children receive cash and food assistance at rates slightly higher than the state average, but a whopping 41 percent receive health care through Medicaid or the state's MICHild program, well above the nearly 29 percent rate statewide.

"I know that our Medicaid numbers have been increasing over the years, but at a gradual stable growth. The outreach that the state has done, and our office has done, has been productive in seeing that more of our children are receiving medical services," said Pekuri.

On the Wisconsin side

"Wisconsin's children continue to benefit from strong public investments in education and health care. (But) we clearly have problem areas," said Charity Eleson, executive director of the Wisconsin Council on Children and Families.

Eleson blamed the national recession that took hold after the Sept. 11 terrorist attacks. Adults with lower education levels and fewer skills lost their jobs, she said, and families hovering around poverty fell into it.

Jason Helgeson, executive assistant to Health and Family Services

Secretary Helene Nelson, said the poverty figures may improve with the economy.

Democratic Gov. Jim Doyle put several provisions aimed at children in the 2005-07 state budget, but Republican legislators wiped them out, Helgerson said. Gone are grants to expand 4-year-old kindergarten statewide; a day care rating system; and allowing pregnant women to participate in the state's welfare reform program Wisconsin Works. Currently only parents with children can join the program.

Doyle signed the budget Monday.

One provision that survived was a plan to overhaul the state's child welfare system. The U.S. Department of Health and Human Services mandated all 50 states develop plans after they all failed parts of an agency review of their child welfare.

Wisconsin's version calls for a quality assurance program, reviews of county child welfare practices, training and adoption/foster care information centers.

JoAnna Richard, executive assistant to Workforce Development Secretary Roberta Gassman, said the Doyle administration hasn't given up on the day care rating system.

The report ranked Wisconsin first in the nation in the high school dropout rate; the state's rate fell from 6 percent in 2000 to 4 percent in 2003. The national dropout rate in 2003 was 8 percent, down from 11 percent in 2000. Other findings included:

- The teen death rate in Wisconsin dropped from 66 per 100,000 in 2000 to 62 per 100,000 in 2002. The national ratio was 68 per 100,000 in 2002.

Eleson said more Wisconsin teens are occupied with school or a job and don't participate in dangerous activities.

- The teen birth rate dropped from 35 per 1,000 in 2000 to 32 per 1,000 in 2002.

- The percentage of children in single parent households grew from 25 percent in 2000 to 26 percent in 2003.

The Casey Foundation is a private organization that promotes families and children.

Michigan didn't do well on measures related to the economic security of families in the Kids Count report, but its lowest ranking was for its infant mortality rate. The state came in 38th among the 50 states because eight of every 1,000 infants died before their first birthday in 2002, one more than the national average of seven, the report said.

Michigan made improvements in other areas, including a 40 percent drop in teenagers who stopped attending high school over a three-year period.

Many minorities in foster care; state panel wants to know why

7/28/2005, 3:47 p.m. ET

By AMY F. BAILEY The Associated Press

LANSING, Mich. (AP) — It took Barbara Trickey nearly a year of fighting and thousands of dollars in attorney fees to get her young grandsons out of foster care.

Malek and Malcolm Evans spent 10 months in two foster homes three-and-a-half years ago after their mother left the youngest, Malcolm, in the car overnight in the middle of winter when he was 5. The boys have lived with their grandmother since October 2002.

"I had to get an attorney to get my grandchildren out," Trickey, an elementary school art teacher, told a state task force this week.

The 40-member panel is trying to find out why black children such as Malek and Malcolm Evans account for only 17.5 percent of Michigan's 2.6 million children overall but make up 51.9 percent of children in the state's foster care system.

According to a report by the state Department of Human Services, nearly 10,300 of the 19,800 children in foster care in May were black. Black children enter the foster care system at a higher rate, stay in the system longer and are reunited with their families less often than others, the report said.

This week's hearing at Lansing Community College was one of several held across the state since August to help the task force come up with ways to reduce the number of minority children in the system.

Donna Budnick, a specialist on American Indian affairs for the state Department of Civil Rights, said caseworkers are more likely to remove children from the home of a minority family than offer services or direct them to programs to help them get back on their feet.

"This system punishes you if you are a minority," Budnick told the task force, which met jointly with the Michigan Civil Rights Commission.

The racial disparity in Michigan's foster care system is not unique.

Two-thirds of the children in foster care across the country are black or Hispanic, according to a report released in June by University of Florida researcher Lance Carroll II.

CONTINUED

Many minorities in foster care; state panel wants to know why

Page 2 of 2

Foster children in large cities also are usually minorities, in part because those cities have large minority populations. Ninety-five percent of children in Chicago's child welfare system are minorities while 90 percent in New York's system in 1997 were minorities, Carroll's research showed.

Bill Long, an attorney and the former head of the Lansing-based Michigan Federation for Children and Families, said the high number of minorities in the foster care system is caused by higher rates of poverty, school expulsions, inadequate housing and limited options for child care in those communities.

"This is a problem resulting from inherent racial and ethnic biases and practices which have become part of our system," he said at this week's meeting.

He encouraged the task force to require counties with a big gap between minority and white foster children to reach out to minority communities and to use the policies that have been successful in counties where the number of white and minority foster children are more closely balanced. He also wants caseworkers to do a thorough search for any relatives who could take a child on at least a temporary basis.

Long asked the task force to spend more money on training and other efforts to improve the system. He said the investment will save money in the long run because it will mean fewer young adults enter the juvenile justice and corrections systems.

But major changes will be difficult as the Republican-controlled Legislature and the Democratic governor, Jennifer Granholm, work with limited resources to balance the state budget for the fiscal year that begins Oct. 1.

Department of Human Services Director Marianne Udow, co-chairwoman of the task force, said the panel is looking at a large problem influenced by a number of different factors, including the state's lagging economy. But she said she is focusing on manageable goals, such as beefing up training for caseworkers and getting services to needy families earlier.

"We face so many huge issues," she said in a telephone interview. "We cannot fix everything, but we can make it better."

Udow said the task force is developing its recommendations and plans to meet with American Indian tribes in the Upper Peninsula in coming weeks. The panel will report its results by year's end, she said.

Some numbers from the foster care system

7/28/2005, 3:17 p.m. ET

By The Associated Press

(AP) — A state task force is trying to find out why there are so many more minorities than whites in the foster care system and to develop a set of recommendations by year's end to help address the disparity. Some numbers being reviewed by the panel:

- _ Number of black children in foster care: 10,275
- _ Total number of children in foster care: 19,767
- _ Number of black children in Michigan: 453,859
- _ Total number of children in Michigan: 2.6 million
- _ Percentage of state's children who are black: 17.5 percent
- _ Percentage of children in state foster care system who are black: 51.9 percent

Source: May 2005 report by the Michigan Department of Human Services

Warnings go to deadbeats Parents who owe \$5,000 or more in child support face jail and fines

Friday, July 29, 2005

BY STEPHENIE KOEHN Ann Arbor News Staff Reporter

Prosecuting Attorney David L. Morse and Friend of the Court Melissa Scharrer said they would be sending "Fair Warning" letters out by today to parents who owed \$5,000 or more in back payments. The letters advise these delinquent parents - who collectively owe more than \$1.6 million - that failure to make good on their financial obligations to their children could result in a maximum four-year prison sentence and \$2,000 in fines. It also makes it clear that no more notices will be given before arrest warrants are served, Morse said.

This is the second year for the project, Scharrer said. "A similar program in 2004 resulted in the collection of over \$56,000 in back child support payments from those parents seeking to avoid criminal prosecution," she said. "It's been shown that families who provide financial and emotional support for their children are less likely to have children who get into trouble. We're hoping to prevent crime from happening."

In those 2004 cases where the letter evoked no response, Morse filed charges, a procedure he plans to repeat this year.

"We waited 30 to 60 days and then filed charges against the 20 who made no effort to respond," Morse said. Twelve have been convicted so far, he said. Of those, four went to prison, four went to jail and four are on probation. Five have warrants outstanding and one jury trial and one preliminary exam are scheduled. One convicted person is awaiting sentence.

"Our county judges have provided very good support," Morse said. In the past, deadbeat parents might be sent to jail for 30-45 days - and many were more than willing to put in the time.

"We said we need to set an example, so we upped the ante," Morse said. "We tell them, 'These are your children; you have a legal and moral responsibility to support them. We'll work with you, but you have to make an effort.'"

"We'll see how many people respond this year," Morse said. "We're not looking to put people in prison. We're looking to get people to pay child support. If they won't try, we'll find room in the inn.

"When push comes to shove, it's surprising how much people can do."

Reach Stephenie Koehn at skoehn@livingstoncommunitynews.com or at (810) 844-2008.

Local News

Cox touts achievements during visit

Attorney general has had success in child support, protection

By RICH ADAMS
Tribune Editor

CHEBOYGAN - Michigan Attorney General Mike Cox covered a number of topics during a Thursday visit to Cheboygan, including consumer protection, child-support enforcement, open government and his political future.

Cox, the state's first Republican attorney general in more than 25 years, was elected in 2002 to replace then-Attorney General Jennifer Granholm. He won by a mere 5,900 votes, which equates to one vote per precinct statewide.

Cox said that although his office has focused on protecting consumers, it has also expanded its scope to include a crackdown on deadbeat moms and dads, which Cox set as a priority when he took office. It has been a success, he explained.

"Early this week we were at \$15.9 million recovered," Cox said. "That represents 1,692 children in the state who have gotten money that is owed."

He cited only one Cheboygan County case that his office pursued that resulted in the payment of \$20,000 to a child here and \$7,000 to a child in Mackinac County that the man fathered through another woman.

Cox said the crackdown has served more as a deterrent for deadbeat parents than an enforcement of child support judgments.

"It is sort of like if you live in a metro area and roll through a stop sign," Cox said. "You might roll through that stop sign every day and in 500 times never see a cop. Then your behavior changes because you see one. You start coming to a stop."

Cox said he has heard of parents beginning to pay because the custodial parent threatened to contact the AG's office.

But he won't go after parents who are incapable of paying, he said.

"We are not looking to create a social problem, we are trying to solve them," he said.

"We won't go after someone who just got laid off at the paper mill or a 40-year-old with no marketable skills who doesn't have a job," Cox continued. "We go after those who choose not to pay child support, not those who simply cannot."

Cox said he has bolstered his criminal division to help county prosecutors with limited staffs who find themselves in long-term investigations.

"We want to be a bigger resource for outstate prosecutors, police and sheriff's departments," he noted. "When they find they have their hands full with a long-term investigation or cold case, they can't drop everything and do the investigation."

Since he beefed up the division, his office has helped solve the 1986 deaths of two deer hunters in Mio and the conviction of serial killer Coral Watts, who was recently released from prison in Texas and then convicted for 1989 killings in Michigan.

Cox also has pushed for laws that protect senior citizens and disabled adults. Last month Cox released the results of two studies that showed that nearly 10 percent of the employees of adult residential care facilities have criminal backgrounds. The study came nearly three years after Michigan law required background checks on such employees.

Cox said Thursday the current law requires a single background check. He would like to see the check become an annual event.

"It only costs \$10 for a background check," he said. "That's a small fee to pay to see that our most vulnerable adults are safe."

He also said he would like to step up enforcement in nursing homes, prosecuting operators who fail to report injuries, which would indicate a lack of disclosure in general.

"It sets the stage for abuse," he said.

Cox also conducts seminars on the Freedom of Information Act and Open Meetings Act throughout the state. It benefits both those who hold office and the public.

"There are 10,000 public bodies in Michigan subject to the Freedom of Information Act," Cox explained. "These are part-timers. It's not their day job. They felt passionate about an issue enough to be elected or appointed to the body. But they don't know all the rules."

He said the purpose of the educational seminars is to inform elected officials as to what is exempt from the two laws and what must be made public.

The public benefits as well.

"The average person believes that since this is America, they are entitled to X, Y and Z," Cox stated Thursday. "But there are sometimes when boards can go into executive session. These seminars are a way to get everyone on the same page about the basic rules."

Cox has ruled out a run for the governor's office in 2006. But leaves the future open after that.

"I can hold this office until 2010 constitutionally, if I am re-elected," he said.

Medical program helps adults with low incomes

Enrollment for the state's Adult Medical Program (or Adult Benefit Waiver) is open until Sept. 30. The program provides basic health coverage to individuals with very low incomes. There is no cost to join.

People between 19 and 64 years old whose income is 35 percent of poverty level may qualify. They must not have health insurance or be eligible

for Medicaid. The state Department of Human Services determines eligibility and enrolls people.

For more information, call 543-0860 or (269) 948-3200.

ILLINOIS DEPARTMENT OF HUMAN SERVICES

Kalamazoo Gazette

July 28, 2005

Meeting to focus on long-term-care issues

Recommendations by the Governor's Medicaid Long-term Care Task Force is the topic of a meeting next week of the Michigan Campaign for Quality Care, Kalamazoo Chapter. The meeting will begin at 6:30 p.m. Monday in the Georgian Room of the Kalamazoo County Human Services Department, located at Nazareth, 3299 Gull Road.

Those who attend will have a chance to hear details about the Medicaid Long-term Care Task Force recommendations and to tell legislators how they feel about the issues. State Reps. Lorence Wenke, R-Richland, and Alexander Lipsey, D-Kalamazoo, are scheduled to attend the meeting.

The task force was formed by Gov. Jennifer Granholm. The Michigan Campaign for Quality Care is a nonpartisan, grass-roots consumer group whose goal is to improve the care, quality of life and choices for long-term-care patients in Michigan.

Letters for July 29

Friday, July 29, 2005

Preventing unintended pregnancies

I am delighted to see that Gov. Granholm unveiled her new "Blueprint for Preventing Unintended Pregnancies." Finding common ground by promoting healthy discussion between our young people and parents, as with her new "Talk Early, Talk Often" plan, will educate our youth and encourage responsibility.

This will protect them from unintended pregnancies and from sexually transmitted diseases. According to the state, some 26,000 unintended births were covered by Medicaid in fiscal year 2000, costing Michigan \$286 million. The governor's new plan of expanding government-funded birth control programs for low-income women will help the state save millions of dollars. It shows fiscal responsibility and a high regard for people's lives. According to Betty Dooley, executive director of the Women's Research and Education Institute, women of childbearing age spend 68 percent more in out-of-pocket health care costs than men the same age. I am a part of the low-income bracket, and am glad to see that I may get the assistance I need with my own health care.

I'm glad to read that Rep. Barb Vanderveen, R-Allendale, is ready to put politics aside and support helping parents discuss sexuality with their children and requiring equitable health insurance coverage for women.

I don't really see this as a liberal or conservative issue, but rather as one of common sense. I am pleased to see that we are finding common ground in this area and working together to prevent unintended pregnancies and abortion.

CALLIE MELTON/Hudsonville

July 28, 2005

UNEMPLOYMENT DROPS IN MOST REGIONS

Most regions of Michigan saw unemployment follow the statewide trend in June as jobless rates declined in 15 of the state's 17 labor regions, the Department of Labor and Economic Growth announced Thursday.

Metro Detroit and the Lansing region were the only ones not to see declines in their unemployment rates. The other regions all saw small decreases of a few tenths of a percentage point.

The 11-county northeast Lower Peninsula region recorded the biggest decline with the onset of seasonal hiring for the tourism season, going from a 7.9 percent unemployment rate to 6.8 percent. The Upper Peninsula and northwest Lower Peninsula saw similar declines thanks to the tourism season.

The six-county Metro Detroit region saw its unemployment rate rise from 7.2 percent to 7.7 percent, primarily because of auto-sector layoffs.

Sectors seeing increases in employment for June were professional and business services (up 12,000), leisure and hospitality services (up 11,000), construction (up 9,000) and trade, transportation and utilities (up 7,000). But manufacturing employment declined statewide by 5,000.

For the month, the five counties with the lowest unemployment rates were Mackinac (3.8 percent), Leelanau (4 percent), Washtenaw (4.4 percent), Cheboygan (4.7 percent) and Cass (4.7 percent).

The five counties with the highest unemployment rates were Baraga (10.7 percent), Oscoda (9.8 percent), Montmorency (9.2 percent), Wayne (9.1 percent) and Lake (9.1 percent).

Published July 29, 2005

2 brothers perish in north Lansing fire

Firefighters believe fatal blaze started in home's kitchen

By Kelly Hassett
Lansing State Journal

Two young brothers died Thursday after they were trapped in a fire that gutted their north Lansing home and ruptured the core of a family.

Corey Blocker Jr., 8, and his 4-year-old brother, Tyreek Washington, were in a back bedroom as their mother and relatives circled the burning house in vain, trying to get them out.

"I just heard screaming," said neighbor Rye Hursey, 18. "The family was outside calling their names."

Fire investigators hope to have a better idea today about what caused the fire at 304 W. Thomas St.

Investigators believe that the blaze started about 10:30 a.m. in the kitchen at the rear of the 1 1/2-story home, firefighter Ignacio Centeno said.

The boys' mother and another sibling were inside the house when the fire started but managed to get out, he said.

The deaths stunned friends and neighbors who lined the dead-end street, watching smoke seep from charred window frames.

They tried to comfort the family, including Mickie Baker, the boys' grandmother.

"My chest hurts," Baker said. "I don't know if it's from grief or smoke or my heart."

Firefighters saw smoke coming from the direction of Thomas Street and were on their way when they got the call that two children were inside the house, Centeno said.

"By the time they arrived, the house was engulfed in smoke with major flames coming from the back of the house," he said.

Lansing police officers who were already at the house tried to break down the front door but couldn't get through to save the brothers, Centeno said.

The home had at least one smoke detector, which did go off, he said.

The boys were Lansing's fourth and fifth victims of fatal fires in 2005.

Fire crews knew when they got to the house that the chance of getting through the smoke and flames was slim - and that was difficult to accept, Centeno said.

"You hear 'juvenile,' and you think, 'Where and how fast can you get them out?'" he said.

Officers and fire investigators shoveled piles of soot and debris out of the back of the house early Thursday afternoon.

A white patio set, a grill and an overturned stroller dotted the backyard, covered in gray ash.

To help the family

- Anyone wishing to help the family may call the American Red Cross Mid-Michigan Chapter at 702-3336.

- A separate fund for the family is expected to be set up today.

Rick Bellant, 46, watched quietly from the house next door. Yellow siding on the wall closest to the fire melted from the intense heat.

"I turned the sprayer on before the firefighters got here," he said.

"We were right next to the windows."

His face changed when he mentioned Corey, who used to play with his friend's young son and was at the house often.

"I came back at 6 p.m. last night, and Corey was standing in the doorway holding a teddy bear," Bellant said, putting his head down.

The American Red Cross Mid-Michigan Chapter is helping the family, and a separate fund for them should be set up in the next day or so.

Baker, the boys' grandmother, said her family wanted her to go to the hospital to get checked for smoke inhalation.

Every few minutes, she was greeted with hugs and offers of help from relatives and friends.

The boys were good, good children, Baker said.

"Corey was doing summer camp, and Tyreek was getting ready to start kindergarten," she said with tears in her eyes.

Contact Kelly Hassett at 267-1301 or khassett@lsj.com.

Child sex assault brings prison term

Friday, July 29, 2005

The Grand Rapids Press

GRAND RAPIDS -- A Walker man accused of sexually assaulting two children was sentenced Thursday to at least 17 1/2 years in prison.

Joseph Gross, 40, earlier pleaded guilty to two charges of first-degree criminal-sexual conduct with a child as young as 5 and a 14-year-old from the same family.

Other charges were dismissed as part of a plea agreement. Kent County Circuit Judge Dennis Leiber sentenced Gross to concurrent terms of 17 1/2 to 40 years in prison.

Gross, a former Special Olympics volunteer, is mildly mentally disabled, but a state psychiatrist found him able to understand the charges and assist in his defense.

He was not accused of sexually assaulting children through volunteer activities.

Officials seek 'drifter' who talked online with teen

Friday, July 29, 2005

JOE SNAPPER THE SAGINAW NEWS

CARO -- Calls about sightings of a "drifter" suspected of trying to contact a 14-year-old Vassar Township girl he met on a Web site are flooding in, authorities say.

"We've had so many sightings all over the county," said Tuscola County Undersheriff James Jashinske. "Every person with a white T-shirt or walking or riding a bike is getting a call in." Sheriff's deputies want to interview Jeremy Thomas, 22, because the 14-year-old and her family told investigators Thomas tried to contact her even after he was jailed overnight in Genesee County.

He is wanted on a concealed weapon charge, police there said, but Jashinske said his deputies are not planning to arrest him on such a charge. "We don't know of any warrants for him," he said. Thomas, who police said has a past fraud conviction, was arrested on a suspected weapons violation July 13 at the University of Michigan-Flint campus library. Investigators, however, couldn't keep him behind bars long enough to obtain a warrant and set an arraignment, said Sgt. Al Cozart, a university police supervisor.

"We were lucky to lodge him in the first place," Cozart said. "The Genesee County Jail is always overflowing. The only reason we could lodge him is because he gave us a false ID."

Campus police were investigating a suspicious backpack unattended in the library when Thomas -- who lists a California address -- walked up to claim it. Police found in the pack two knives with ornate handles and blades up to 10 inches long, one curved, Cozart said.

Officers planned to seek nothing beyond a weapons charge when Thomas insisted he log off his library computer. Police read the screen and later investigated profiles of Thomas and the teen, who likely had spoken before in the vampirefreaks.com chat room.

"There was no contact for sex or anything illegal," Cozart said. "She was talking to him like I'm talking to you."

Jail officials were forced to release Thomas because the warrant charging him with carrying a concealed weapon was not issued until Monday -- 11 days after his arrest, Cozart said.

Thomas, who originally told police his name was Josh Robert Thamas, has a forgery conviction, said Charmers Sanders, the school's public safety chief. He noted Thomas' probation office is in

Missoula, Mont., although it is unclear whether he committed the crime in California or Montana.

Sanders described Thomas as a "vagrant." He said Thomas told police he was visiting a friend at U-M Flint and he planned to travel on to North Carolina or South Carolina.

The mother of Thomas' 14-year-old chat partner said their Internet correspondence contained nothing "sexually explicit," Sanders said.

The Web site vampirefreaks.com is devoted to "gothic and industrial culture." Web site rules state, "You must be at least 13 years old to sign up for this site ... Nudity is not allowed. Do not start any trouble or drama with other users on the site."

Meanwhile, police in Millington are also looking out for Thomas, said Chief Steve Roggehntine.

Joe Snapper is a staff writer for The Saginaw News. You may reach him at 776-9715.

Grand Rapids Press

Letters

July 29, 2005

Report abusive behavior

The article about the death of the 2-year-old-girl first horrified then angered me. A neighbor admitted having been witness to the man yelling at the child and repeatedly kicking the tricycle she was on the night before she was found dead. She was interviewed by the newspaper and said that she never thought about calling the police.

How sad that the realm of personal and moral responsibility has downwardly spiraled to the point that everyone not only looks the other way but isn't ashamed to tell the world about it after the fact! The neighbor recalled that the girl's mother was watching while this abuse went on and that's why she didn't call for help. Well, so what if the mother was watching!

Many times when children are abused in a home, the wives or girlfriends are also abused and they are terrified of standing up to the attacker. While this MMOB (mind my own business) neighbor didn't physically harm this child, if I were her I would surely feel that I made a grossly negligent mistake in not calling for help for this little girl who couldn't speak for herself.

DENISE FILCEK/Grand Rapids

Grand Rapids Press

Letters

July 29, 2005

Protect children

I am outraged at the death of Ayana Cisneros ("Weeks after abuse probe, 'blunt force' kills girl, 2," Press, July 20)! Children's Protective Services knew there was a possibility of abuse in the mother's home and still returned her there. Was there a follow-up visit?

There should have been further investigation, if there is only a hint of abuse. If the laws don't permit removing a baby from a potentially dangerous environment, then perhaps the laws need to be changed. How many more children will be killed if nothing is done?

PAT HANSEN/Grand Rapids

July 29, 2005

WOOD TV News

Democrats call for removal of video game from shelves

Senator Mark Schauer at a meeting Wednesday, urging retailers to stop selling the video game.

(AP-Lansing, July 27, 2005, 5:36 p.m.) Democratic lawmakers and Governor Jennifer Granholm want Michigan retailers to stop selling a popular video game in which explicit sexual content can be unlocked with an Internet download.

State Senate Democrats say the maker of "Grand Theft Auto: San Andreas" should recall the game and retailers should pull it from their shelves.

The download shows a male and female character engaged in various graphic sexual positions.

The governor has sent a letter to nearly 60 retailers asking them to not sell the game.

Democrats also are criticizing House Republicans for not passing legislation to crack down on the sales of violent or explicit games.

A GOP spokesman says House lawmakers are carefully reviewing the legislation to make sure it can withstand a court challenge.

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ASSOCIATED PRESS WIRE

Australia Outlaws 'Grand Theft Auto'

Friday, July 29, 2005 10:05 AM EDT

SYDNEY, Australia - Australian officials effectively banned the computer game "Grand Theft Auto: San Andreas" and ordered it removed from stores Friday because it contains hidden sex scenes that can be viewed with a special Internet download.

The Office of Film and Literature Classification said in a statement it had outlawed sales of the game by stripping it of its official classification after learning of the explicit content.

"Revocation of a classification means the computer game cannot be legally sold, hired, advertised or exhibited in Australia from the date the decision is made," the statement said.

"Businesses that sell or hire computer games should remove existing stocks of this game from their shelves immediately," said Des Clark, director of the government-funded classification board.

The game involves a main character seeking bloody vengeance on gang-filled streets, firing automatic weapons and picking up women along the way.

After downloading and installing a modification to the game _ one of many "mods" available on Web sites maintained by video game enthusiasts _ a new world opens up in which the girlfriends appear nude and engage in explicit sex acts, according to the modification's author.

The classification board in October 2004 gave the game a MA15+ rating, meaning it could be sold only to people aged over age 15, and warned that it contained "medium level animated violence, medium level coarse language."

On Friday, Clark advised parents to be on the alert for their children accessing the explicit scenes.

"Parents are strongly advised to exercise caution in allowing children continued access to the game," he said _ particularly if they have access to the Internet modification.

A service of the Associated Press(AP)

July 28, 2005

The Detroit Free Press

Lawmakers: Keep violent video games from kids

A group of lawmakers renewed its call Wednesday for passage of legislation aimed at keeping violent and sexually themed video games out of the hands of children, arguing that recent revelations about hidden sex scenes in the game "Grand Theft Auto: San Andreas" made the situation more urgent.

State Sen. Mark Schauer, D-Battle Creek, called the game's content, which can be unlocked with codes available on the Internet, "disgusting ... pornography."

The state House and Senate have approved bills designed to keep racy and adult games away from kids. But differences remain to be worked out.

It wasn't clear Wednesday how any of the pending bills would affect "Grand Theft Auto: San Andreas," which was pulled from the shelves by many retailers after the sexual content was discovered.

By Dawson Bell

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REPORT NO. 145 VOLUME 44 THURSDAY, JULY 28, 2005

SENATE DEMS CALL FOR ACTION ON EARNED INCOME CREDIT

If the state considers any cuts in the Single Business Tax, Senate Democrats want an earned income tax credit for the state's low-income workers to be enacted as well.

In a telephone press conference, Senate Minority Leader Bob Emerson (D-Flint) said his caucus would not vote for a cut in the SBT without a tax cut enacted for the lowest income workers in the state. While many politicians "pontificate" on protecting the family through social issues, Mr. Emerson said, "We assert the best way to protect the family is financially."

Mr. Emerson called for action on SB 496, sponsored by Sen. Buzz Thomas (D-Detroit), which would provide eligible taxpayers a 25 percent of their federal earned income tax credit. However, Sen. Nancy Cassis (R-Novi) has also introduced SB 453, which would provide a 10 percent credit on the federal EITC.

Ms. Cassis, chair of the Senate Finance Committee and the Senate representative on the workgroup trying to develop an SBT compromise, said the focus first has to be on making Michigan more competitive and improve the business climate to build jobs,

"We are trying to rescue the governor's tax plan, so it seems very strange that Sen. Emerson would come out with conditions now," Ms. Cassis said. "It's the governor's policies that are scaring businesses away," she said, adding that it hurts the poor the most.

She said she supports an EITC, but that should be step two of the process to make Michigan more competitive. First, lawmakers have to get people back to work and then they can focus on credits for those already working. But to call for enacting an EITC now would hurt the negotiations underway, she said.

"This governor and the Democratic Party seem oblivious to the ranks of the poor to come out with threats at this time," she added.

In the House, Matt Resch, spokesperson for Speaker Craig DeRoche (R-Novi), said, "Any time Democrats talk about tax cuts it's a good day in Michigan." House Republicans will be willing to look at anything that will make Michigan more competitive, he said, but hearings across the state have called for efforts to rejuvenate job creation.

Ari Adler, spokesperson to Senate Majority Leader Ken Sikkema (R-Wyoming), said Republicans "have never met a tax cut they didn't like. And if they can figure out a way to make it all work, we're happy to look at it."

Governor Jennifer Granholm has called the EITC a good idea, and her spokesperson Liz Boyd said the proposal has potential but a source for paying for the credit has to be found. She also said the workgroups now underway needed to have a chance to complete their work.

Since the federal EITC was created under the administration of former President Ronald Reagan, who called the measure one of the greatest tools to fight poverty ever created, Mr. Emerson hoped the proposal would win Republican support.

"Strong families make Michigan strong," he said, and the credit will help those subsisting near the poverty line off public assistance.

Some 645,000 people could be affected by such a credit, Senate Democratic officials said. If Mr. Thomas' bill were to become law, then it could save low-income taxpayers \$300 million. If Ms. Cassis' bill became law, it would save those taxpayers as much as \$120 million.

With discussions underway on changes to the SBT, there are suggestions that instead of a revenue neutral proposal as Ms. Granholm proposed the final proposal will include a tax cut of as much as \$125 million.

But if taxes are going to be cut for corporations, then the taxes should be cut for the lowest income residents in the state, Mr. Emerson said, and his caucus agrees.

"It's important to make this point at this time," Mr. Emerson said. If there are tax cuts, then "I know who's going to pay the cost of budget cuts, and that's basically poor people," so passage of the credit is critical to assure that lower income individuals can continue working.

Rich Studley, vice president of the Michigan Chamber of Commerce, said Mr. Emerson has a point. "If revenues to the state of Michigan are up it's because taxpayers, both individual and business taxpayers, are working smarter and harder," he said, adding that they should benefit from tax breaks.

While an EITC isn't on the organization's to do list, Mr. Studley said, it would not oppose a proposal that was balanced with relief for business taxpayers. He also said the chamber would consider it a better proposal to help the low income than a boost to the minimum wage.

And Mr. Emerson said increased revenues the state might see reflected in the August 17 revenue estimating conference could help pay for the proposal, or he would be willing to look for another source to pay for the credit.

Michigan has one of the most regressive tax systems in the nation, Mr. Emerson said, and enacting an EITC would help make more the system progressive. Already 15 states and the District of Columbia have enacted an EITC, and some organizations like the Michigan Catholic Conference have called for the state to create an earned income tax credit.

Man charged with assault

Friday, July 29, 2005

The Grand Rapids Press

HOLLAND -- The Holland man who was hit by a pickup Tuesday morning on Int. 196 about 30 minutes after he allegedly beat his girlfriend with a hammer was arraigned via video Thursday from the Ottawa County Jail on a charge of assault with intent to murder. Alton E. Overweg, 38, was released Wednesday from Spectrum Butterworth Campus in Grand Rapids and taken into police custody. District Judge Brad Knoll set Overweg's bond at \$250,000. The 22-year-old victim is recovering from injuries, police said. If convicted, Overweg could be sentenced to life in prison.

211 seeks funds to stay afloat

Friday, July 29, 2005

By Myron Kukla The Grand Rapids Press

OTTAWA COUNTY -- The director of the Ottawa County 211 service for social agencies said Thursday the group needs about \$60,000 to keep operating next year.

Executive Director Sherry Miller told the Herrick District Library Board Thursday the organization had lost funding from the Greater Ottawa County United Way and would need assistance from other organizations to keep operating.

By dialing 211, people in need can be connected round-the-clock information with services such as domestic violence shelters, food pantries, transportation and rent assistance.

Miller said the two-year-old organizations processed more than 2,854 calls last year. The group may join a regional 211 service that will cover western Michigan from South Haven to the Mackinac Bridge.

Miller said the United Way wanted to concentrate on funding services that provided direct aid to individuals. Miller said the group still is supported by the Holland/Zeeland Foundation.

She said libraries are being approached with funding requests because they are often the first place people in need turn to for information.

"Tradition has established libraries as the information center of the community," Miller said.

Herrick District Library Reference Services Head Kelli Perkins said local libraries could not maintain the type of thorough list of service agencies that is provided by the 211 service.

"There's a lot of things we do very well, but one of the things we don't do well is try to keep track of every social service provider and how to reach them. But, (211) is doing a good job of that," Perkins said, noting there is an effort to do the 211 service nationally.

Miller said her presentation was for information only and did not have a set amount she was seeking from the Herrick Library. She plans to present a grant request at another meeting.

Need help for your teen?

Kalamazoo Gazette

Friday, July 29, 2005

Here is a list of regional residential programs that offer help for troubled or at-risk children:

n The Michigan Youth Challenge Academy is administered by the Michigan National Guard at the Veterans Affairs Medical Center in Battle Creek. Sixty percent of the funding comes from the U.S. Department of Defense and the remaining 40 percent from the state of Michigan. This 22-week residential program is for Michigan residents who are 16 to 18 years old and who are high school drop-outs or at risk of dropping out -- "just not doing well," said Ben Wallace, director of admissions and graduate affairs. In the quasi-military educational program, the cadets wear uniforms and earn at least 13 college credits through Kalamazoo Valley Community College. They can also get vocational training and can earn a GED certificate. The program does not accept youths with felony convictions. For more information, call (800) 372-0523 or visit www.ngycp.org/mi or www.michiganyouthchallenge.com.

Cost: None. Participants and graduates also are not obligated to enlist in the U.S. military.

n Starr Commonwealth, based in Albion, enrolls young men ages 12 to 18 who have been ordered into this program by courts. In addition to its residential program, Starr Commonwealth runs day-treatment programs for boys and girls in Battle Creek and Detroit. For more information, call (517) 629-5591 or (800) 837-5591 or go to www.starr.org.

Cost: No cost to parents; the cost is financed by the state.

n Montcalm School for Boys (in Albion) and Montcalm School for Girls (in VanWert, Ohio) are both offshoots of the Starr Commonwealth school in Albion. These private placements are for teenage males and females who are experiencing family conflict or have ADD/ADHD or any number of other issues. For more information, call Norman Ostrum at (866) 244-4321 or visit www.montcalmschool.org.

Cost: \$6,500 a month, plus a \$1,000 enrollment fee. Individual programs run from nine to 12 months.

For other resources and programs, visit My Troubled Teen at www.mytroubledteen.com.